



Democrats Vow 5-Day Workweek... Sort Of

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WASHINGTON -- The five-day workweek, an idea alien to congressional culture in recent years, is about to make a comeback. "We are going to work longer hours, we are going to work full weeks, we are going to have votes on Mondays and Fridays," new Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., advised his colleagues at the opening of the new session on Jan. 4.

Other Americans, from teachers to police officers to factory workers, put in five days a week on the job, Reid said. "Shouldn't we here in Washington, where we do our business in this laboratory we call the Senate, do the same?"

Old habits, of course, are not that easy to kick. The Senate was off the next day, a Friday.

The House under new Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., also is committed to working longer hours. But the chamber was not in session last Monday, when some members attended the national college football championship game in Arizona. This Monday, Congress is closed for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

There also are the occasional interruptions, such as the Republican retreat that will shut down the House on a Thursday and Friday later this month. House Democrats hold their retreat the following week, making two three-day work weeks in a row.

First votes following a weekend are being scheduled late in the afternoon or evening, effectively making the first day of the work week a travel day for many lawmakers.

Nonetheless, the burst of activity is reminiscent of when House Republicans took over in 1995 after the GOP had spent 40 years in the minority. It is a radical break from the recent practice of convening a new session in early January and then immediately taking off until the president's State of the Union address at the end of the month.

Under GOP leadership, the House fell into a pattern where no votes were scheduled until 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday and the last votes were on Thursday afternoon. That way, lawmakers could leave the Capitol on Thursday evening and not return until the following Tuesday.

Republicans argued that their new breed of citizen legislators should spend more time with their families and constituents back home. The abbreviated schedule also made life easier for lawmakers living in California and Hawaii and gave lawmakers more time for fundraising.

The Senate has tended to work somewhat longer hours. But both chambers grew accustomed to lengthy "district work periods," when Congress is in recess.

In 2006, besides being off in January, lawmakers were off a week or more for President's Day in February, St. Patrick's Day in March, Easter in April, Memorial Day in May and Independence Day in July. Then they took off six weeks in August and a month off before the November elections.

According to the office of House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md, the House was in session 102 days last year, fewer than the 110 days of the "do-nothing" Congress when Harry S. Truman was president in 1948.

Congress under Democratic-control still will not be punching the clock for a 9-to-5 schedule.

Hoyer said his plan for most weeks was to hold first votes at 6:30 p.m. on Mondays and work until about 2 p.m. on Fridays. Long holiday recesses may be shortened, he added, although "there is great value to House members being in their districts and talking to their people."

Former House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif., who retired at the end of the last session after 28 years in the House, said five-day workweeks could be particularly tough on West Coast lawmakers.

Democrats, he predicted, might have to come up with a more structured approach, such as two weeks or three weeks of work in Washington and then a week back in the district.

"I'm anxious to see if it can work," he said of the Democratic plan, noting that he had at times been frustrated by workweeks in which he had "36 hours to get things done."

Fred Beuttler, deputy House historian, said today's lawmakers still put in a lot more time on Capitol Hill than did their predecessors. Until the 1930s, when Franklin D. Roosevelt needed Congress around to enact his New Deal legislation, a Congress elected in November frequently did not convene until December of the following year, 13 months after the election.

Abraham Lincoln had to call Congress into a special session in July 1861 to deal with the secession of the South and witness the routing of the Union Army at the first Battle of Bull Run.